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Nikolay Myaskovsky and the “Regimentation” of Soviet Composition: A Reassessment

PATRICK ZUK

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Four decades have elapsed since the publication in 1972 of the first edition of Boris Schwarz’s magisterial *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, a landmark contribution to scholarship in the field. A richly informative study drawing on a wealth of Russian source materials, it has not been superseded by any of the comparable general surveys that have since appeared, even if one or two of these have offered valuable fresh perspectives—most notably, Levon Hakobian’s *Music of the Soviet Age: 1917–1987* (1998) and the two volumes devoted to the Soviet era in Dorothea Redepenning’s *Geschichte der russischen und*

I offer my sincere thanks to Séamas de Barra, Pauline Fairclough, Marina Frolova-Walker, and the anonymous readers for their constructive comments and suggestions. I also thank the following friends and colleagues: Tatiana Fedorovskaya, Dmitry Gorbатов, Levon Hakobian, Aleksandr Komarov, Liudmila Kovnatskaya, Tamara Levaya, Marina Rakhmanova, Marina Raku, Iosif Rayskin, Richard Taruskin, Yekaterina Vlasova, and Konstantin Zenkin. Marianna Taymanova advised on linguistic questions and finer points of translation. The staff at the following institutions provided invaluable assistance: Durham University Library, the British Library, the Glinka Museum of Musical Culture, RGALI and RGASPI. I gratefully acknowledge a research grant provided by the British Academy to assist with the cost of undertaking archival research in Moscow.

der sowjetischen Musik (2008).¹ Schwarz's work has not only shaped our view of the period, but also established the terms of engagement for much subsequent scholarship.

Inevitably, with the passage of time aspects of Schwarz's book have come to seem in need of revision, especially in the light of research undertaken since the dissolution of the USSR. His contentions concerning what he characterized as the "regimentation" of Soviet composition after the imposition of Socialist Realism in 1932 furnish a particularly important case in point. Several scholars have since pointed to circumstances that would have impeded stringent bureaucratic controls on musical creativity: the low level of importance attached to music by senior Communist Party leaders and the corresponding vagueness of official policy; and the practical difficulties inherent in implementing any more specific policies even had they existed.² These writers by no means seek to minimize the significance of traumatic events such as the condemnation of Shostakovich in 1936, but offer compelling reasons to believe that until the watershed year of 1948 occurrences of this nature were haphazard and contingent rather than forming part of a concerted long-term campaign. There is, moreover, a dearth of evidence to indicate that systematic attempts were made to coerce composers to write in any particular fashion, even if music couched in certain kinds of modernist idioms (such as dodecaphony) stood no chance of being published or performed for several decades.³

This research raises an even more basic question, which has received scant attention to date—namely, the extent to which it is legitimate to regard the styles of Soviet composition between 1932 and the mid 1960s as having been fundamentally determined by creative regimentation, as

¹ See also Frans C. Lemaire, *La musique du XX^e siècle en Russie et dans les anciennes Républiques soviétiques* (Paris: Fayard, 1994); and Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Unlike Schwarz's book, neither presents significant original research, being essentially syntheses of secondary sources; nor do they substantially revise his account. Indeed, Lemaire expressly acknowledges his extensive indebtedness to Schwarz's work. The treatment of Soviet music and musical life is disappointingly superficial in the five chapters of Maes's book on developments after 1917: of major figures, only Shostakovich and Prokofiev are discussed in any detail; and the conspicuous neglect of Russian-language source materials further limits its value.

² See Leonid Maksimenkov, *Sumbur vmesto muziki: stalinskaya kul'turnaya revolyutsiya 1936–1938* (Muddle instead of music: Stalinist cultural revolution 1936–1938) (Moscow: Yuridicheskaya kniga, 1997); Caroline Brooke, "The Development of Soviet Music Policy 1932–41" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1999); Kiril Tomoff, *Creative Union: The Professional Organization of Soviet Composers, 1939–1953* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Simo Mikkonen, *Music and Power in the Soviet 1930s: A History of Composers' Bureaucracy* (Lewiston N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009).

³ See Pauline Fairclough, "The 'Perestroika' of Soviet Symphonism: Shostakovich in 1935," *Music and Letters* 83, no. 2 (2002): 259–73.

Schwarz held to be predominantly the case. Schwarz was by no means the first commentator to suggest that Stalinist cultural policy had calamitous consequences for the development of Soviet music: this view was widespread throughout the Cold War period, but receives what is perhaps its most comprehensive and forceful formulation in his book.⁴ Here are some representative passages from the opening chapters:

The Resolution of 1932 came at a time when Soviet music was in a state of crisis. A vicious campaign by the proletarian RAPM [Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians] had discredited musical modernism by equating it with “bourgeois decadence” . . . As a result, advanced composers turned conventional, and conventional composers became commonplace. . . . Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Soviet music moved to a plateau of safe conservatism. . . .

Shostakovich was the lone survivor of what, in the 1920s, had been a vigorous avant-garde school of music. . . . Soviet music became “provincial.” The harder Soviet officialdom clamoured for music “Socialist in content, national in form,” the more Soviet music became estranged and isolated from the musical mainstream of the West.⁵

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Fundamental to this analysis is the assumption—which Schwarz, like his predecessors, appears to have accepted as axiomatic—that from the early 1930s the styles of Soviet composition were primarily shaped by external pressures and ideological constraints. This gave rise to a further chain of assumptions, all of which are evident from the passages cited above:

1. After 1932, Soviet composers had little choice but to write in conservative, bland idioms that conformed to the dictates of Socialist Realism if they were to escape censure. The more stylistically adventurous amongst them, virtually without exception, capitulated under duress.
2. Much Soviet composition of the Stalinist period developed in an inherently artificial manner, being a product of constraint. It is radically different in

⁴ During the Cold War the temptation to portray Soviet musical life in the most somber hues proved difficult to resist in the West. The titles of publications by the émigrés Juri Jelagin and Andrey Olkhovsky are indicative: Juri Jelagin, *Taming of the Arts*, trans. Nicholas Wreden (New York: Dutton, 1951), and Andrey Olkhovsky, *Music under the Soviets: The Agony of an Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955). Nicolas Nabokov’s influential polemics depicted the USSR as an environment inimical to all compositional activity worthy of the name, in contrast to the “free West,” where avant-garde art could flourish. See Ian Wellens, *Music on the Frontline: Nicolas Nabokov’s Struggle against Communism and Middlebrow Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). This construct of the Soviet Union as an artistic wasteland underwent further elaboration in Stanley Dale Krebs, *Soviet Composers and the Development of Soviet Music* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970), the first English-language survey of its kind. Krebs found seemingly irrefutable confirmation of the sterilizing effects of Soviet cultural policy on musical creativity at every turn. Schwarz demonstrated a considerably greater capacity for sympathetic engagement.

⁵ Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917–1981*, enlarged edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 115–16, 124, 135.

nature from the music composed in Western democracies that permitted artists complete creative freedom.

3. Under other circumstances, Soviet composition would (and, indeed, should) have developed very differently. The imposition of Socialist Realism and the accompanying policies of cultural isolationism pursued during the Stalinist and post-Stalinist periods were highly detrimental, because Soviet composers were cut off from contemporaneous Western artistic influences and compelled to write in *passé* styles. (One notes Schwarz's supposition that certain manifestations of Western musical modernism constituted the "main-stream," and that anything else could only be "provincial" by default—including most compositional activity in the USSR.)
4. From an artistic point of view, Soviet composition of this era is of interest only to the extent that it manages to transcend these stylistic constraints and signals unwillingness to comply with them—or better still, suggests an attitude of covert dissidence.

One of the most serious weaknesses of Schwarz's book is that the author offers scant evidence to substantiate his large claims. The chapters on Soviet composition between the 1930s and early 1960s do not consider individual figures in detail, aside from Shostakovich and Prokofiev. He made little attempt to assess the responses of other composers to such pressures as may have existed or the extent to which individual styles may reflect officially imposed restrictions on creative freedom. Moreover, Schwarz's discussion of the music written by Soviet composers is superficial and seldom enters into technicalities. The reader is merely given to understand that much of what was written after 1932 was couched in the "platitudinous" styles of Socialist Realism and hence "not really exportable"—that is, unlikely to arouse interest in the West.⁶

Schwarz's view that Soviet musical creativity was largely vitiated by bureaucratic regimentation and official harassment has proved durable. Indeed, similar claims have been echoed in Western writings since *glasnost*, sometimes restated in even more dramatic and sweeping terms. Richard Taruskin, for example, assumes that "centralized totalitarian control of the arts" was complete by 1936, when a "command structure" was put in place. Like other Soviet artists, composers (and especially Shostakovich), he contends, experienced thereafter "extreme mortal duress" comparable to that endured by "condemned prisoners or hostages or kidnap victims," which compelled them to make ignominious compromises with the regime. (Taruskin draws a modern parallel with the fate of the British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie, "whose response to dire death

⁶ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917–1981*, 135.

threats . . . included reconfirmation in the faith of his oppressors.”⁷) These circumstances, together with the imposition of Socialist Realism, condemned Soviet composers to the Sisyphean task of attempting “to preserve in a totalitarian aspic all the mammoths and mastodons of the Western classical tradition—the program symphony, the oratorio, the grand historical opera.”⁸

Sweeping generalizations of this nature prompt unease. While one would not wish for a moment to minimize the difficulties with which Soviet composers had to contend in their professional lives, or to dispute that some experienced considerable pressures to conformity and self-censorship, one wonders whether they were invariably as extreme as Schwarz and subsequent commentators have suggested, and whether a more systematic examination of the music written during this era would bear out suppositions that they had such a markedly adverse effect.

These questions pose themselves all the more insistently when one considers that the careers and creative achievements of most Soviet composers—including major figures, such as Myaskovsky, Aram Khachaturian, and Vissarion Shebalin—still await comprehensive reappraisal in the light of documentation available since *glasnost*. For information, researchers are still largely reliant, as Schwarz was, on Soviet accounts that have to be approached with considerable caution. Even the best of these have significant limitations (Soviet biographies, for example, mostly present their subjects in a highly idealized manner); and at worst, they are not only of poor quality, but written from tendentious perspectives. Not infrequently, such publications are more notable for what they omit to mention than what they reveal. As Detlef Gojowy observed, the advent of perestroika confronted musicologists with nothing less than the task of thoroughgoing and radical reassessment: “How many allegedly established ‘facts’ that have been reiterated as certitudes in book after book must now be called into question and revised? . . . Entire biographies must be rewritten afresh.”⁹ Until new biographies and studies of individual composers’ outputs grow considerably more numerous, there is a danger that the music of this period will continue to be appraised on the basis of questionable assumptions. In this respect, Laurel Fay’s biography of Shostakovich and Simon Morrison’s work on Prokofiev have acted as valuable correctives in demonstrating that the life and work of these composers defy analysis in terms of simplistic schemata of

⁷ Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutic Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 514, 516.

⁸ Ibid., 517–18. The implication that these genres had come to be regarded as “extinct” outside the USSR is surely questionable.

⁹ Detlef Gojowy, “Sinowi Borissowitsch im Keller entdeckt: Sowjetische Musikwissenschaft in der Perestrojka,” *Das Orchester* 39, no. 11 (1991): 1244.

coercion, capitulation, and artistic compromise. One of the principal difficulties is to attain a perspective that allows for complexity of response and a wide measure of variation, even over the course of an individual career: it is surely unjustified to assume that all composers reacted in a similar way to their circumstances. A reconsideration of the dominant assumptions that have influenced the Western reception of Soviet music of the Stalinist period would consequently seem timely.

An excellent illustration of the inherent dangers of such assumptions is provided by Nikolay Myaskovsky (1881–1950), a major figure of this era. Insofar as he has received attention in English-language scholarship, Myaskovsky has generally been viewed as a prime example of a modernist who retreated into safe conventionality to become, in Schwarz's phrase, a "middle-of-the-road" composer from the early 1930s, and thus typified the general tendency of artistic compromise. It is notable that subsequent commentators have interpreted Myaskovsky's development along similar lines. Marina Frolova-Walker has contended that Myaskovsky moved away from what she describes as "avant-garde creativity" as a result of intimidation from RAPM and evolved a Socialist Realist compositional style befitting what she calls Stalin's "art of boredom."¹⁰ In an essay on Myaskovsky's orchestral works, Taruskin presents an even more negative view, intimating that by the end of his career the composer's capitulation to external pressures was abject and complete: he deems Myaskovsky's Twenty-Seventh Symphony to be a "coerced response to Zhdanov," as evidenced by passages in its finale that purportedly prompt "a shuddering reminder" of the closing sentence of George Orwell's novel *1984*—"He loved Big Brother."¹¹

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In the present article I offer an alternative reading of Myaskovsky's artistic development and stylistic trajectory, arguing that it is of considerably greater complexity and interest than Schwarz and subsequent

¹⁰ Marina Frolova-Walker, "From Modernism to Socialist Realism in Four Years: Myaskovsky and Asafyev," *Muzikologija* [Belgrade] 3 (2003): 199–217; idem, "Stalin and the Art of Boredom," *Twentieth-Century Music*, 1, no. 1 (2004): 101–24; and idem, "The Glib, the Bland, and the Corny: An Aesthetic of Socialist Realism," in Roberto Illiano and Massimiliano Sala eds., *Music and Dictatorship in Europe and Latin America* (Turnhout and New York: Brepols, 2009), 403–23.

¹¹ Richard Taruskin, *On Russian Music* (Berkeley, California; London: University of California Press, 2009), 292. Taruskin does not attempt to substantiate this damning judgment: notable Soviet commentators rightly regarded the Twenty-Seventh Symphony as one of Myaskovsky's finest achievements. See, for example, Genrikh Orlov, *Russkii sovetskii simfonizm: puti, problemi, dostizheniya* (Russian-Soviet symphonism: paths, problems, achievements) (Moscow: Muzika, 1966), 277–82. I have argued elsewhere that Myaskovsky displayed remarkable courage and personal integrity in the wake of his condemnation: see Patrick Zuk, "Nikolay Myaskovsky and the events of 1948," *Music and Letters*, 93, no. 1 (2012): 61–85. Taruskin's assumptions concerning the Twenty-Seventh Symphony strike one as rather curious, especially as he discusses the ever-present danger of appraising Soviet music in terms of simplistic stereotypes and clichés in the same essay.

commentators have credited. A closer examination of the circumstances shows that most, if not all, of the typical preconceptions discussed above are questionable in his case.

A pronounced stylistic shift is indeed discernible in Myaskovsky's music in the early to mid-1930s: from this point onward, his harmonic language began to draw more extensively on the resources afforded by diatonic modality, and he had less frequent recourse to the densely dissonant chromaticism that was characteristic of major works of the previous decade, such as the Tenth Symphony of 1927. It is well-known that he came under sustained attack from 1929 onward: as a prominent composer and composition teacher of modernist sympathies, he was an obvious target for RAPM's hostility, especially after the organization assumed control of the country's major musical institutions during the Cultural Revolution—including two at which he held senior posts, Muzgiz (the music section of the state publishing house) and the Moscow Conservatoire. In construing these circumstances, Schwarz assumed that a simple relation of cause and effect was operative. He recounts that the composer "abandoned the Association for Contemporary Music of which he had been a founding member," and affiliated himself in 1931 with a new group of creative musicians who declared themselves willing to cooperate with RAPM.¹² "Like so many of his fellow-artists, he felt compelled to be more responsive to the cultural appeals of the Party: the non-political intellectual of the 1920's [*sic*] was *passé*—the so-called 'fellow traveller' had to yield to the committed artist."¹³ The composition in 1931–1932 of his Twelfth Symphony, the so-called "Collective Farm" Symphony, which was ostensibly based on a program depicting the putative benefits accruing from Stalin's drive to collectivise Soviet agriculture, was held by Schwarz to mark "a milestone in Myaskovsky's creative evolution." Schwarz claims that Myaskovsky spent the remainder of his career in pursuit of a more "objective" style suitable for communicating with mass audiences—a quest that was only intermittently successful and sometimes yielded merely "shallow optimism and simplification."¹⁴ While Schwarz's discussion of Myaskovsky is respectful in tone (he calls him "a consummate master"), it is nonetheless evident that he regards much of his work after 1932 as an artistic compromise forced on the composer by circumstances. Myaskovsky's apparent willingness to engage with the subject of agricultural collectivisation seemed to furnish eloquent confirmation that he, like most of his colleagues, had

¹² Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917–1981*, 59–60, 78–79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 165–66.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 165, 169.

been cowed into meek acquiescence with Party demands. Plausible as this interpretation of events might seem, however, it misconstrues circumstances that were in reality far more complex. In part, this view originated in Schwarz's uncritical reliance on such meagre source materials containing information about this phase of Myaskovsky's career as were available to him at the time of writing—principally, a short autobiographical essay that the composer contributed to *Sovetskaya muzika* in 1936; and Tamara Livanova's book on Myaskovsky published three years after the composer's death.¹⁵ Both of these are highly problematic and require consideration in some detail here.

Myaskovsky's essay, which offers a brief survey of his career and principal compositions, constitutes his only major statement about his own work after 1917. That he wrote it at all seems highly significant, given his notorious reluctance to make public pronouncements of any kind.¹⁶ It is, to say the least, a peculiar production. Strikingly, Myaskovsky could scarcely find a positive word to say about anything he had written before 1932. He condemns most of his previous work in a modernist vein as unsatisfactory, including even an acclaimed masterpiece such as the Sixth Symphony—and blames these putative artistic failures on his prior lack of a "theoretically supported and grounded worldview"—in other words, his failure to embrace communism with sufficient fervour.¹⁷ He describes himself as having since embarked on an arduous process of self-reform and is at pains to assure the reader of the sincerity of his quest for an appropriate "musical language of Socialist Realism in instrumental music," but confesses to feeling inadequate in the face of this responsible task on account of a "certain immaturity in my musical thinking."¹⁸ Such self-deprecatory pronouncements seem remarkable coming from an eminent and highly experienced composer—and strike one as rather suspicious. One's doubts are reinforced by the manner in which Myaskovsky alludes to writing the essay in a diary entry: he uses the verb *stryapat'* in its colloquial meaning of "to concoct" or "to cook up," which

¹⁵ Nikolay Myaskovsky, "Avtobiograficheskiye zametki o tvorchestvom puti" (Autobiographical notes about my creative path), *Sovetskaya muzika* 6 (1936): 5–11, reprinted in *N. Ya. Myaskovskiy: Sobraniye materialov v dvukh tomakh*, ed. Semyon Shlifshteyn, vol. 2 (Moscow: Muzika, 1964), 5–20; and Tamara Livanova's *N. Ya. Myaskovskiy: tvorcheskii put'* (Myaskovsky's creative path) (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye muzikal'noye izdatel'stvo, 1953), 204.

¹⁶ In a secret report submitted to the Central Committee in preparation for drafting the 1948 Resolution on music, a hostile former colleague of Myaskovsky observed: "The characteristic trait of Myaskovsky's public persona is extreme taciturnity. He does not speak at meetings, he does not write articles. He expresses himself solely through music, which he creates in the silence of his study." Nikolay Sherman, "O sovetskom muzikal'nom tvorchestve" (About Soviet musical composition) RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 636, ll. 38–89.

¹⁷ Myaskovskiy, "Avtobiograficheskiye zametki o tvorchestvom puti," 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

suggests a decidedly ambiguous attitude toward the task.¹⁹ The essay's curious features are almost certainly explained by the fact that it was written at the express request of the editor of *Sovetskaya muzika* not long after what Myaskovsky described in another diary entry as the "general scare" caused by the condemnation of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*.²⁰ This circumstance suggests that as one of the USSR's leading composers and composition teachers, Myaskovsky felt under pressure—or perhaps was even placed under pressure—to affirm publically his commitment to Socialist Realism. The essay probably reveals little, if anything, of his real attitudes; rather, it should be read as a minor masterpiece of tergiversation, in which the composer attempted to deflect potentially hostile criticism during a very tense period by donning a mask of exaggerated humility and engaging in a ritualized display of self-criticism, a routine practice in Soviet public life of the Stalinist era.²¹

Livanova's monograph should be approached with even greater caution. The author offers a highly tendentious account of Myaskovsky's career, presenting it as an edifying tale of a recalcitrant modernist who eventually reformed under the beneficent guidance of the Communist Party. The essential features of this narrative had been devised by Dmitry Kabalevsky in the extended obituary of his former teacher, published in *Sovetskaya muzika* in 1951.²² Crucially, both writers gave currency to the notion that in 1929, the year that Stalin characterized as the "great turning-point" in the destiny of the USSR, the composer supposedly experienced a Damascene conversion induced by his close study of Marx's and Lenin's writings, which wrought a transformation in his outlook. The "Collective Farm" Symphony was held to mark an important milestone in his abjuration of modernist decadence and turn toward Socialist Realism. Livanova span out the story of Myaskovsky's struggle to achieve socialist standards of artistic perfection at tedious length, detailing his lapses along the way to the accompaniment of much sententious moralizing and copious obligatory quotations from the Marxist-Leninist classics.

¹⁹ Entry for 9 April 1936, reproduced in Ol'ga Lamm, *Stranitsi tvorcheskoy biografii Myaskovskogo* (Pages from Myaskovsky's creative biography) (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1989), 250.

²⁰ Ibid., 249 (entry for 28 January 1936).

²¹ For discussions of Soviet rituals of public self-criticism at this period, see Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 142ff; Lorenz Erren, "Selbstkritik" und Schuldbekennnis: Kommunikation und Herrschaft unter Stalin, 1917–1953 (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2008), 93 ff.

²² Dmitriy Kabalevskiy, "Nikolay Yakovlevich Myaskovskiy: K 70-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya" (Nikolay Yakovlevich Myaskovsky: On the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of his birth) *Sovetskaya muzika*, 18, no. 4 (1951): 18–34.

The nature of the book is readily explicable when one considers the circumstances in which it was written, as is the construction that Kabalevsky and Livanova placed on Myaskovsky's career. Only a few years earlier, in 1948, Myaskovsky had been publicly censured, together with Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and his students Khachaturian and Vissarion Shebalin, in an official resolution promulgated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Kabalevsky's name was also supposed to have featured on the list of proscribed composers, but his wife, who had good connections within the security organs, managed to effect its removal. (In the event, the name of Gavriil Popov was substituted.) This close shave unnerved Kabalevsky: from the reminiscences of Myaskovsky's close friend Ol'ga Lamm, we learn that he was terrified of being compromised by association with his former teacher and pleaded with him to send a letter of apology to Stalin, which Myaskovsky courageously refused to do.²³ Livanova similarly found herself in hot water the following year, as she was among the prominent musicologists who were censured for writing too favourably about the music of the "formalist" composers.²⁴ When the 1948 resolution was promulgated, she informed Myaskovsky of her bafflement at his condemnation, but evidently found it expedient to take a rather different view when she came to write her book. It is consequently not surprising that Kabalevsky's and Livanova's accounts of Myaskovsky's career took the form that they did given the repressive climate of the late-Stalinist era. On the one hand, they go out of their way to show themselves critical of Myaskovsky's modernist past; on the other, they try to justify their previously published favorable commentary on his work by demonstrating that at least some of it was worthy of attention, as the composer subsequently reformed. In both cases, one suspects, this is a calculated strategy to establish the authors' impeccable ideological orthodoxy and ward off further criticism.

Livanova's monograph is thus a typical product of its period, which saw a widespread degradation of Soviet musicology under ideological pressures. While one can readily understand the difficulty presented by the dearth of source materials at Schwarz's disposal, it is nonetheless puzzling that he accepted Livanova's account of Myaskovsky's career without demur and used it as the basis of his own, given her book's manifest failure to satisfy the most basic expectations attendant on reputable scholarship.²⁵ This circumstance seems even more curious when

²³ See Ol'ga Lamm, "Vospominaniya" (Reminiscences) in Marina Rakhmanova ed., *Sergey Prokofiev: Vospominaniya, pis'ma, stat'i* (Reminiscences, letter, essays) (Moscow: Dekav-S, 2004), 239, 244–45, 266n4.

²⁴ See Yekaterina Vlasova, *1948 god v sovetskoy muzike* (The year 1948 in Soviet music) (Moscow: Klassika-XXI, 2010), 373.

²⁵ The book's shortcomings were readily apparent to contemporary Soviet readers: Myaskovsky's student Igor' Belza recalled that many prominent musicians regarded it as a shameful production. See his essay "O. T. I. Livanovoy—uchyonom i cheloveke"

one considers that Schwarz devoted a chapter of his book to discussing the 1949 purge of the musicological section of the Composers' Union and its highly detrimental consequences for the quality of scholarly publications produced subsequently, making specific allusion to Livanova's case.²⁶

Neither of the publications consulted by Schwarz, then, can be considered to present a reliable account of Myaskovsky's responses to the dramatic upheavals in Soviet musical life during the late 1920s and 1930s. Although sparse and not particularly enlightening, the surviving documentation relating to the later period of his career suggests a rather different picture. In the first place, there would appear to be no corroborating evidence to support Kabalevsky's and Livanova's contention that Myaskovsky found artistic salvation in communist theoretical writings after a protracted intellectual crisis. Kabalevsky may indeed have seen works by Marx, Engels, and Lenin on Myaskovsky's desk when he visited him in the late 1920s and early 1930s, as he claimed in his reminiscences, and his teacher may even have discussed them with apparent enthusiasm.²⁷ As Nadezhda Mandel'shtam reminds us, however, these texts quickly became obligatory items on bookshelves in the apartments of the intelligentsia during the early Stalinist period as a visible external token of ideological conformity.²⁸ For similar reasons, respectful allusions to Marx and Lenin in conversation also formed part of the ritualized conventions of social intercourse during these years, especially with officials or with people one had no reason to trust. It is curious that of all the members of Myaskovsky's circle of friends and colleagues who recorded their reminiscences of him, Kabalevsky is the only one to make a claim of this nature: if Myaskovsky's outlook had genuinely undergone such a notable transformation, one imagines that others would also have remarked on it.

Nor does the composition of the so-called "Collective Farm" Symphony support such a claim, Myaskovsky's account of its genesis in his autobiographical essay notwithstanding:

When the first calls were heard for the collectivization of peasant agriculture, I was extremely enthusiastic about this idea, which seemed to

(T. I. Livanova as scholar and person), in Devil' Arutyunov and Vladimir Protopopov eds., *T. I. Livanova: stat'i, vospominaniya* (T. I. Livanova: essays, reminiscences) (Moscow: Muzika, 1989), 298.

²⁶ The chapter in question is "Musicologists on Trial," in Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917–1981*, 249–68. Livanova is discussed on pp. 254–55.

²⁷ Dmitriy Kabalevskiy, "O N. Ya. Myaskovskom," in Shlifshteyn, *N. Ya. Myaskovskiy*, vol. 1, 307–35.

²⁸ Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*, trans. Max Hayward (London: Collins, Harvill Press, 1971), 238.

me to be especially revolutionary in its effects. One day, at a meeting in Muzgiz, Marian Koval' dropped hints that I should compose a work based on a theme connected with it—"The Sowing." Almost immediately, musical ideas and a kind of plan of a symphony about the countryside occurred to me, which would depict the latter at different stages—beforehand, during the struggle for a new way of life, and then the new. By the autumn of 1931, I had already started to realise my concept.²⁹

The idea that Myaskovsky should have been seized with a desire to write a symphony on the theme of agricultural collectivisation strikes one as peculiar when one considers his aesthetic outlook up to this point. The music that he had written previously made no concessions to mass audiences. Neither had he attempted to engage creatively with favored ideological themes during the 1920s: he continued to compose predominantly in abstract instrumental forms, eschewing the so-called "democratic" genres of opera, choral music, and program music (as they were termed in the jargon of Soviet music criticism).³⁰ Moreover, from Myaskovsky's early journalistic writings it is evident that his understanding of the role and purpose of artistic activity was an austere and extremely high-minded one.³¹ There were strict limits to the kinds of emotional experience that he considered worthy of musical embodiment: these were predominantly serious in nature and demanded a correspondingly elevated style. Among the composers he most admired in his youth was Schoenberg, who clearly represented an artistic ideal: he was unstinting in his praise for the Austrian master's integrity and resolute eschewal of compromise.³² He was, moreover, unsparing in his condemnation of music that struck him as being in questionable taste or which gave

²⁹ Myaskovskiy, "Avtobiograficheskiye zametki," 18.

³⁰ Myaskovsky planned an opera based on Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*, but did not complete it. After his early symphonic poems *Molchaniye* (Silence, 1910) and *Alastor* (1913), he never returned to the genre. Of his later works, only two appear to have been inspired by extra-musical stimuli—the Eighth Symphony (1925) by the adventures of the seventeenth-century folk hero Stenka Razin; and the Tenth Symphony (1927) by Pushkin's narrative poem *The Bronze Horseman*. Myaskovsky refrained from making the programmatic basis of these works explicit, however.

³¹ Between 1911 and 1914, Myaskovsky contributed numerous articles to the periodical *Muzika*, which was edited by his friend Vladimir Derzhanovsky. These record his assessments of music by a wide range of contemporary figures, thus affording valuable insights into his tastes and artistic outlook. For a useful survey, see Oleg Belogradov, *N. Ya. Myaskovskiy — kritik* (Moscow: Muzika, 1989).

³² *Pelleas und Melisande* won his approval for not making "the slightest attempt to ingratiate itself with either the common people or with connoisseurs." Nikolay Myaskovsky, "Peterburgskkiye pis'ma" (Letter from Petersburg), *Muzika*, 113 (1913): 54–58, reprinted in Shlifshteyn, *N. Ya. Myaskovskiy*, vol. 2, 108.

expression to trivialities.³³ To a composer of his temperament, the very notion of a symphony about a collective farm must have seemed inherently ludicrous.

Myaskovsky's apparent *volte-face* almost certainly resulted from his difficult circumstances in 1929–1931 (which Livanova scarcely mentions) rather than from a spontaneous enthusiasm for the subject matter, as he claimed in his autobiographical essay. His allusion to his former composition student Marian Koval' furnishes an important clue to events. He first encountered Koval' when the latter enrolled at the Moscow Conservatoire in 1925. Koval' was politically active almost from the beginning of his career and in 1929 became a member of RAPM. The organization's dominance at the Conservatoire was facilitated by the appointment in the same year of a Party apparatchik, Bolesław Przybyszewski (Pshibishevsky), who instigated a series of highly controversial reforms that wreaked havoc internally: they not only jeopardized academic standards, but seriously threatened the Conservatoire's continued existence. Its fundamental aim was redefined as the training of organizers for amateur proletarian musical activities, rather than the education of highly skilled professional musicians. Koval' and a number of other young musicians affiliated with RAPM soon became a force to be reckoned with within the institution. None of them amounted to very much in terms of talent, but they amply compensated for this shortcoming in missionary zeal. It soon became evident that they were intolerant of dissenting opinions, and attempts were made to purge the Conservatoire of staff who supposedly held heterodox political views. The mood of many faculty members became increasingly desperate, but they had little choice but to keep silent or resign. According to the official history of the institution published in 1966, "Pshibishevskiy immediately sacked anyone who protested against these harmful innovations."³⁴ RAPM's journal *Proletarskiy muzikant* devoted much space to vituperative attacks on "reactionary" composers who wrote "superfluous" music in a modernist vein. In the very first issue, Yuriy Keldish singled out Myaskovsky for criticism, condemning the Sixth Symphony as decadent and reflective of an outmoded bourgeois mentality.³⁵ As a leading article contributed two years later by Lev Lebedinsky indicates, Myaskovsky and several students to whom he was particularly close (including Shebalin and Khachaturian) were

³³ Myaskovsky's distaste for what he considered to be the triviality of much new music was a recurrent leitmotif in his criticism: epithets such as *poshlost'*, *banal'nost'*, and *trivial'nost'* (vulgarity, banality, and triviality) recur with considerable frequency.

³⁴ Lev Ginzburg ed., *Moskovskaya konservatoriya 1866–1966* (Moscow: Muzika, 1966), 322.

³⁵ Yuriy Keldish, "Problema proletarskogo muzikal'nogo tvorchestva i poputnichestvo" (The problem of proletarian musical creativity and fellow-travellerdom), *Proletarskiy muzikant*, 1 (1929): 14.

regarded with intense suspicion as untrustworthy “fellow travellers” and had come under pressure to reorient themselves politically and artistically. Their harassment by RAPM’s leaders prompted accusations that the organization had instituted a reign of terror—a change that Lebedinsky indignantly sought to counter.³⁶ His protestations notwithstanding, composers of modernist sympathies unquestionably felt besieged. Anatoliy Aleksandrov, who was friendly with both Myaskovsky and Shebalin, recalled in later life:

Before my Seventh Sonata [of 1932], I had written nothing for a long time—the *rapmoutsi* knocked my confidence and left me unable to work. . . . They wrote nasty things about me in their journal and considered me . . . an aesthete. RAPM’s theories provoked debates on what to write, how to write. I got confused and did not know what to do.³⁷

Aleksandrov recalled that Myaskovsky was dismissed by RAPM as an *otrīzhka simvolizma*—a coarse expression that translates literally as “a belch of symbolism”—and thus was considered to be a throwback to that artistic movement. As such, he would undoubtedly have been considered to exert an unwholesome influence, especially on his composition students. A letter to Boris Asaf’yev of 5 October 1931 reveals his reaction to these strained circumstances:

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I am now trying my utmost to keep out of everything. I have virtually left the Conservatoire—that is to say, I practically have no class any longer. I also want to leave Muzgiz, but the thought of having a conversation with Verkhotursky sickens me. But I must do it—otherwise it’ll be the death of me.³⁸

Myaskovsky must have felt desperate indeed to consider resigning from his teaching post and giving up his position at the state publishing house since these provided most of his income. Matters soon reached a crisis point. A few days previously, on 2 October, Shebalin had delivered a fiery speech at a meeting convened by Vseroskomdram (the All-Union Society of Playwrights and Composers) in which he roundly condemned RAPM’s policies and the blatantly self-seeking behaviour of its leaders.³⁹ He

³⁶ See Lev Lebedinskiy, “Bor’ba za perestroyku” (The battle for political realignment), *Proletarskiy muzikant*, 10 (1931): 13–14.

³⁷ Vladimir Blok and Yelena Polenova eds., *Anatoliy Nikolayevich Aleksandrov: Stranitsy zhizni i tvorchestva* (Anatoliy Nikolayevich Aleksandrov: Pages of life and work) (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1990), 124.

³⁸ Shlifshteyn, *N. Ya. Myaskovskiy*, vol. 2, 432. Adol’f Verkhotursky (1870–1933) was director of Muzgiz at the period.

³⁹ An account of this episode is given in Yekaterina Vlasova, “Venere Miloskaya i printsipi 1789 goda” (Venus de Milo and the principles of 1789), *Muzikal’naya akademiya* 3 (1993): 154–77. A copy of Shebalin’s speech has not been preserved, but its general thrust

pointed to the fact that he and other composers of modernist sympathies had effectively been blacklisted and could not get their music published, performed, or broadcast. The RAPM composers, on the other hand, were being heavily promoted and handsomely paid, despite the fact that they were incapable of orchestrating their music themselves and—irony of ironies—had to hire students of some of the very composers they were persecuting to perform the task. Shebalin's courageous act did not go unpunished: in his memoirs Aleksandrov recounted that RAPM's leaders subsequently subjected the young man to highly unpleasant treatment.⁴⁰ By 21 November Shebalin felt forced to send the organization's secretariat a groveling letter of apology in which he retracted his criticisms and gave an undertaking to fall in line with its policies. The same day he and eight other composers, including Myaskovsky, announced that they were distancing themselves from the Association for Contemporary Music and setting up a new composers' organization whose aims would be more closely aligned with those of RAPM.⁴¹

Evidently, Myaskovsky, like Shebalin, felt he had little choice but to make an ostentatious show of willingness to reform. As he contemplated his limited options, it must have seemed advisable to come to an accommodation with Koval' and his colleagues if he were to have any hope of making a living. Ironically, the situation at the Conservatoire would change dramatically the following year, when proletarian artistic organizations were disbanded and the views they espoused were declared ideologically unsound: Przybyszewski was sacked and the status quo ante quickly restored. This outcome could not have been predicted by any means in 1931, however, and the future must have seemed very bleak.

Such, then, was the context in which Myaskovsky composed the Twelfth Symphony, together with a number of marches and his first attempts at mass songs on the kinds of topics favored by RAPM—Soviet fighter pilots, homages to Marx and Lenin.⁴² Indicatively, Myaskovsky did not give any of the latter pieces opus numbers. In a letter of 1 August 1930 to Prokofiev, he explained that he considered the marches unworthy of such a designation because they were "trash." Similarly, he did not acknowledge the mass songs as part of his real output. His likely

can be gathered from a polemical brochure subsequently published by Viktor Beliy, "Fakty i tsifry protiv ocherednoy kleveti na RAPM" (Facts and figures to combat the constant slander of RAPM), supplement to *Proletarskiy muzikant*, 9 (1931).

⁴⁰ Anatoliy Aleksandrov, *Vospominaniya, stat'i, pis'ma* (Reminiscences, articles, letters), ed. Vladimir Blok (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1979), 92.

⁴¹ See "Novoye tvorcheskoye ob'yedineniye" (New creative association), *Proletarskiy muzikant* 7 (1931): 49.

⁴² A list of Myaskovsky's four mass songs is given in Aleksey Ikonnikov, *Khudozhnik nashikh dney: N. Ya. Myaskovskiy* (An artist of our time: N. Ya. Myaskovsky), revised and expanded ed. (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1982), 401.

view of their texts, as indeed, of the ostensible program of the Twelfth Symphony, can be gathered from his remarks in the same letter concerning the subjects currently being mooted by RAPM for new operas, which he declared to be “an absolute outrage on common sense.”⁴³ As his correspondence with Asaf’yev testifies, he had little respect for the music of the RAPM composers, whom he described as “half-educated school-boys.”⁴⁴ This was certainly an accurate assessment of the competence of Koval’, with whom the idea of writing a work on the subject of collectivisation originated. By his own admission, the twenty-four year-old Koval’ was still struggling to master elementary counterpoint, let alone more advanced compositional challenges.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, his limitations did not inhibit him from offering detailed guidance to his renowned teacher on how to approach the task. In a lengthy, sermonizing letter of 6 December 1931 he sought to impress on Myaskovsky the necessity of evolving a more accessible compositional idiom. Unsurprisingly, he considered it essential that the new work should have a text, as this would help make the ideological content more explicit.⁴⁶

Myaskovsky’s response to Koval’s harangue is worth quoting at some length:

Dear Marian Viktorovich,

I have been an absolute swine to you—it has taken me over a month to answer your letter, even though I myself importuned you to write it. It is true that I am still feeling wretched, as I am evidently incapable of breaking free from the captivity of my indispositions. . . . But enough of that. Your letter reached me at a time when I was making enormous efforts to look for a way of realising the concept that you had prompted, and that had taken shape in my mind as long ago as last summer. My searches were agonising; and I was completely immersed in my work and even somewhat dispirited by it. Unfortunately, I must confess that I was quite unable to cope with the task as I would have wished and fear that I will completely fail to satisfy you. It would appear that I have committed all the deadly sins against which you had cautioned me in your letter: the superficial “light” approach; the “individualistic,” “heavy” approach; there is no jubilant passage at the end, and no words whatsoever. All the same, I do not feel that I somehow went off in the wrong direction in my searches. I understand the work’s basic idea in

⁴³ Myaskovsky to Prokofiev, 1 August 1930, in Sergey Prokofiev, *Perepiska*, ed. D. B. Kabalevskiy (Moscow: “Sovetskiy kompozitor,” 1977), 338.

⁴⁴ Myaskovsky to Asaf’yev, 17 May 1930, quoted in Frolova-Walker, “From Modernism to Socialist Realism in Four Years,” 212.

⁴⁵ In a letter of 24 January 1932, Koval’ confessed to Myaskovsky: “My contrapuntal technique is at an extremely low level of development. . . . When it comes to the orchestra . . . I am simply an ignoramus.” Quoted in Vlasova, *1948 god*, 117.

⁴⁶ Koval’ to Myaskovsky, 6 December 1931. RGALI f. 2040, op. 2, d. 161, l. 3.

exactly the same way as you, namely, that its centre of gravity must be in the role of the October Revolution; that is, in that moment which should convert the “idiocy of rural life”⁴⁷ into something else, and which will really mark the beginning of a completely new historical epoch—or even more, for I consider that with the collectivist transformation of the countryside into a genuine socialist workforce *we are commencing a new era in life on the entire Earth*. Unfortunately, it transpired that the theme exceeded my powers, and, not feeling myself to be a composer of vocal music, I did not want to conceive—indeed, I was constitutionally incapable of conceiving—the music other than in instrumental terms. Moreover, such was my original concept and creative stimulus that I could, indeed, *had* to express the theme only in instrumental terms. I did not even look for texts. In sum, I have already sketched the symphony nonetheless, although I do not feel satisfied with it. Nonetheless, it would scarcely be possible for me to rework it, because I am too much in thrall to my concept and my thematic ideas. In order to rewrite it, it would be necessary to put the work aside for about six months and then look at it as though it were written by somebody else. . . . Unfortunately for me, I have to submit the score by a deadline; aside from which, another symphony has already fully matured in my mind and awaits my attention. And the years pass, and I feel that I should hurry if I am still to compose something which would afford me complete creative satisfaction—which, I must confess, I have never experienced fully with a single work of mine up to now. . . . So matters stand with me. As for you, it seems to me that even if you do not know what my attitude is to you and your music, you should be able to feel it, lest you doubt even for a minute my most ardent desire to help you in all your plans and undertakings. Given my complete lack of pedagogical capabilities, I do not know how much I can help you, but I think that if you yourself have a sound knowledge of your weaknesses and are firmly resolved to overcome them, you will be able to get what you need from me—especially as, if I possess knowledge or skill, then I will gladly impart it.⁴⁸

This is surely a remarkable document. On the face of it, Myaskovsky seems to treat Koval’ with extraordinary deference, as if regarding his student as the supreme arbiter of artistic merit. But this deference seems exaggerated, and one’s suspicions are aroused not only by his hyperbolic expressions of enthusiasm for collectivisation (“*a new era in life on the entire Earth*”), but also by the lengthy litany of excuses that he offers for his failure to write the kind of grandiose choral work that Koval’ expected and for producing a symphony instead: he blames his ill health,

⁴⁷ A phrase from the opening chapter of the *Communist Manifesto*: “das Idiotismus des Landlebens.”

⁴⁸ Myaskovsky to Koval’, 16 January 1932, quoted in Georgiy Polyanovskiy, *Marian Koval’* (Moscow: Muzika 1968), 14–15. Emphasis in original.

the inadequacy of his creative powers to do justice to the theme, his incapacity to think other than in purely instrumental terms and his lack of aptitude for writing vocal music (a flagrant untruth, when one considers that Myaskovsky had already composed several dozens of songs), his haste to complete the score by a deadline and the lack of time at his disposal in which to rewrite it, his advancing age, and his desire to press on with other projects. Long before one reaches the closing passage, in which the country's most sought-after composition teacher intimates that he is unworthy to act as the young man's mentor, the reader has begun to smell a rat. In short, it seems plausible to read the letter as a deftly crafted exercise in evasion, in which Myaskovsky sought to outmaneuver a potentially troublesome zealot who had attempted to take charge of his artistic and political re-education, deflecting his anticipated criticisms through flattery and a show of ideological conformity. To judge from Koval's comments on this communication quoted by his Soviet biographer, Myaskovsky's tactic was successful: Koval's vanity was evidently gratified by his teacher's apparent professions of high regard.⁴⁹

A letter sent a few months later to Asaf'yev confirms that Myaskovsky's professions of enthusiasm for the project were anything but sincere: Myaskovsky described the Twelfth as an artistic compromise of which he was ashamed and informed Asaf'yev that he was doing "his utmost" to sabotage the premiere, which the organizers wanted to turn into an occasion.⁵⁰ (In the event, he did not attend, pleading illness.⁵¹) Nonetheless, he had compromised only to a certain extent. The symphony is far from being an assemblage of "Socialist Realist banalities" as Frans Lemaire has suggested,⁵² the rather forced "optimism" of its finale notwithstanding, and is written with all of Myaskovsky's customary subtlety and technical skill. Furthermore, he not only resisted the demand made by Koval' that he employ a text, but also declined to give the work a descriptive title or to supply any particulars of its supposedly programmatic basis beyond the vague details subsequently provided in his autobiographical essay several years later. None of this escaped the notice of contemporary commentators. As Yuriy Keldish pointed out in an article published in *Sovetskaya muzika* in 1934:

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The Twelfth Symphony... lacks any kind of clearly explicit kernel of subject matter. And evidently, it is no accident that the composer did not put "Collective Farm Symphony" on the title page of the score—an epithet that is more a well-known nickname than a precise indication of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 13–14.

⁵⁰ Myaskovsky to Asaf'yev, 6 April 1932, in Lamm, *Stranitsi*, 213–14.

⁵¹ Myaskovsky's diary entry for 5 June 1932, in *ibid.*, 215.

⁵² Lemaire, *La musique du XX^e siècle en Russie*, 441.

the symphony's content.⁵³ Myaskovsky did not supply any program revealing the plot on which he based the composition. The symphony's "program" is only detailed in articles by D. Kabalevsky and M. Cheryomukhin; and while in all probability this programme originated with the composer, attempts to pin down what he intended to convey from moment to moment could seem debateable in some cases.⁵⁴

Although Keldish assures the reader that these considerations "do not give us the right to cast doubt on the fundamental concept of the composition," it is evident that he was skeptical about the symphony's putative programmatic basis and the genuineness of Myaskovsky's "reform."

No matter how sincere the composer may have been, the theme of collectivisation nevertheless seems to a certain degree to be "tacked on" to the work. . . . To transform oneself from an artist who is "sympathetic to Socialist construction" into an artist who, by means of his art, actively organises the masses to fulfill the tasks put forward by the Party, one has to subject even more things in one's ideological baggage to critical reassessment and inspection, as well as one's attitudes to the problems of revolutionary modernity. The extent to which Myaskovsky will manage this and whether he will be able to reform completely—only the next stage of his development will tell.⁵⁵

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In view of these circumstances, Livanova's contention that the symphony reflected a spontaneous transformation in Myaskovsky's outlook appears decidedly implausible, as does Schwarz's claim that it marked his metamorphosis into a "committed artist." It is probable that the symphony's "program" was little more than a convenient fiction and only existed to the extent that Myaskovsky allowed Koval' and others to assume that it did. For reasons of self-preservation, he evidently felt he had to participate up to a point in a charade of "rehabilitation"—but not to the extent of sanctioning a risible title and program for the symphony. Had Myaskovsky's ideological conversion been genuine, he would surely have had no difficulty in doing so. This strategy entailed risks, but it proved successful: as Prokofiev cryptically noted in his diary during his visit to

⁵³ The published score merely bears the dedication "To the Fifteenth Anniversary of the October Revolution."

⁵⁴ Yuriy Keldish, "12-ya simfoniya Myaskovskogo i nekotorye problemı sovetskogo simfonizma" (Myaskovsky's Twelfth Symphony and some problems of Soviet symphonism), *Sovetskaya muzika*, 2 (1934): 15. Keldish refers to Dmitriy Kabalevsky, "Simfoniya bor'bi" (Symphony of struggle) *Sovetskoye iskusstvo* (15 June 1932); and Mikhail Cheryomukhin, "N. Ya. Myaskovskiy i yego 12-ya simfoniya" (Nikolay Myaskovsky and his Twelfth Symphony), *Sovetskaya muzika*, 3 (1933): 100–106. Cheryomukhin (1900–?) was also a composition student of Myaskovsky.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

Moscow in November 1932, five months after the symphony's première, "Myaskovsky has been rehabilitated, at least amongst musicians."⁵⁶

When one turns to examine other works that Myaskovsky composed immediately before and after the Twelfth Symphony, the idea that he readily capitulated to external pressures seems even less plausible. At the very height of his difficulties with RAPM, Myaskovsky turned his attention for the first time in many years to a genre that the organization regarded with particularly intense suspicion—the string quartet. In 1930 he composed in quick succession two complex works for the medium that made no attempt to adhere to the organization's creative directives.⁵⁷ Even more striking in this respect is the Thirteenth Symphony, which was composed directly after the Twelfth in 1933. This one-movement work, which is among the neglected masterpieces of twentieth-century symphonism, gives the impression of having been composed as an act of self-purgation. A gaunt, austere score of great emotional power, it inhabits a psychological world of unremitting desolation: it is tonally elusive throughout and invites interpretation as a thoroughgoing negation of its predecessor's closing pages. Unsurprisingly, the work was performed only once in the Soviet Union during the composer's lifetime at a concert that was closed to the public.⁵⁸ Myaskovsky informed the conductor Nikolay Mal'ko that it proved impossible to arrange performances of it thereafter.⁵⁹ In his autobiographical essay, he made a show of publically disowning the symphony, but according to his student Igor' Belza, he continued to regard it as one of his most significant achievements. At Belza's persuasion, he eventually agreed in 1944 to allow the score to be published, but only after much hesitation: he feared that it risked provoking unpleasant consequences for the members of the editorial board at Muzgiz who had approved it for publication.⁶⁰

If one considers the Twelfth Symphony in the wider context of Myaskovsky's output as a whole, the notion that it constitutes a decisive

⁵⁶ Sergey Prokof'ev, *Dnevnik: 1919–1937*, ed. Svyatoslav Prokof'ev (Paris: sprkfv, 2002), 813.

⁵⁷ The First String Quartet in A minor, op. 33, no. 1 appears to have been written in January 1931. The Second String Quartet in C minor, op. 33, no. 2 was completed only a few weeks later on 4 March. See Lamm, *Stranitsi*, 199.

⁵⁸ The first performance of the symphony in the USSR was given under the direction of Leo Ginzburg on 26 December 1934. Myaskovsky's diary entry for the same day records that the orchestra's dislike of the piece was palpable; see Lamm, *Stranitsi*, 237.

⁵⁹ Myaskovsky to Mal'ko, 10 February 1938, in Ol'ga Dansker ed., *N. A. Mal'ko: Vospominaniya, stat'i, pis'ma* (N. A. Mal'ko: Reminiscences, essays, letters) (Leningrad: Muzika, 1972).

⁶⁰ Myaskovsky had no sooner handed over the score than he wished to withdraw it again, and Belza was obliged to resort to a ruse to prevent him from doing so; see Igor' Belza, *O muzikantakh XX veka: izbranniye ocherki* (On musicians of the twentieth century: selected essays) (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1979), 62–66.

rupture in his creative evolution and marks the beginning of his turn to Socialist Realism also seems untenable. Indeed, it is arguable that in Myaskovsky's case the stereotype of the "regimented" Soviet modernist misrepresents his artistic development in three absolutely fundamental respects—first, because it is questionable to what extent his earlier work should be deemed modernist; second, because the stylistic disjunction between the music that Myaskovsky composed after 1932 and his previous work is by no means as pronounced as has been claimed; and finally, because the degree to which his later work conforms to the tenets of Socialist Realism is also open to doubt. Let us examine these questions in turn.

Although Myaskovsky has been customarily considered a leading representative of Soviet musical modernism by commentators from Livanova onward, the aptness of this characterization is dubious.⁶¹ His work exhibits very little of the radicalism, experimentalism or determined repudiation of tradition that the term modernist is often understood to denote, apart from an intermittent employment of a densely dissonant and chromatic harmonic language in a few works composed in the 1920s. At no point did he compose music that could be persuasively termed "avant-garde"; indeed, his output evinces greater similarities with the work of Zoltán Kodály, Franz Schmidt, Arnold Bax, and other twentieth-century composers whose work represents an outgrowth of late Romanticism in style and sensibility.

Myaskovsky was reluctant to break with the past; and throughout his life his attitudes towards contemporary musical developments outside Russia remained ambivalent. If as a young man he inwardly rebelled against the hidebound conservatism of Anatoliy Lyadov, his composition teacher at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire, paradoxically, the unsympathetic appraisals of work by leading modernists that abound in his letters and journalism are frequently expressed with a vehemence that recalls Lyadov at his most doctrinaire.⁶² At this period, only the music of Debussy, Skryabin, and Schoenberg won his unqualified respect: the work of other modern masters, such as Mahler and Strauss, he summarily dismissed as vulgar and pretentious rubbish.⁶³ His judgments were influenced by

⁶¹ Schwarz even describes him as having been a member of the musical avant-garde in his youth. Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917–1981*, 35.

⁶² See Myaskovsky's comments regarding Lyadov's hostility to modernist compositional idioms in his "Avtobiograficheskiye zametki," 13.

⁶³ Myaskovsky waspishly described Strauss's music as "philistinism triumphant"; see his "Peterburgskiy pis'ma [I]," in Shlifshteyn ed., *N. Ya. Myaskovskiy*, vol. 2, 27. His antipathy to the music of Mahler was largely prompted by the latter's employment of popular songs and intentionally banal musical material, which Myaskovsky considered inappropriate in a symphonic context (see *ibid.*, 106). His enthusiasm for both Skryabin and Schoenberg subsequently waned. See Myaskovsky to Asaf'yev, 17 July 1916, in Lamm,

a strong vein of nationalist feeling, at times bordering on chauvinism. In one of his most important early essays, “Chaikovsky and Beethoven,” he made the startling claim that the Western symphonic tradition had declined after Beethoven’s death until its instauration by Chaikovsky, who represented his only worthy successor. According to Myaskovsky, Chaikovsky had not only demonstrated that the future of the genre lay in Russia, but had also prepared the way for his homeland’s pre-eminence in international musical life. The young man’s aspiration to play a significant role in these developments is clearly evident from his recourse to a long-familiar trope in Russian cultural and intellectual discourse: the progressive degeneration of high culture in the West and the prospect of its regeneration in the East.⁶⁴

Similarly, Myaskovsky’s early work points to a fundamental ambivalence in his creative personality. Almost from the very beginning, it manifests a striking stylistic dualism, oscillating persistently between an idiom indebted to nineteenth-century Russian traditions and another that was more adventurous, especially in regard to its harmonic language. The disparity between works such as the First Symphony (1908) or the Sonata for Cello and Piano (1911) and the twenty-seven settings of the symbolist poet Zinaida Hippus, which Myaskovsky completed between 1904 and 1914, is striking. The idiom of the sonata and symphony clearly derives from the music of Chaikovsky and Glazunov, while the songs evince similarities with the early *Lieder* of Schoenberg or Berg in their post-Wagnerian chromaticism and highly charged musical rhetoric. The contrast between the two styles at its most extreme is immediately evident if one compares the first theme of the sonata’s opening movement with the second version of the Hippus setting *V gostinoy* (In the drawing room), which Myaskovsky completed two years later (exx. 1 and 2). This desolate song inhabits a sound-world that is far removed from the sonata’s warm lyricism and predominantly triadic harmonic language.

While it is natural for young composers to experiment as they are developing an individual creative voice, Myaskovsky’s stylistic dualism nonetheless seems somewhat unusual—first, because it persisted well into the 1920s and second, because the two modes strike the listener as curiously disparate, rather than as the expression of different aspects of a completely integrated artistic personality. The dualism suggests that

Stranitsi, 123; and Natal’ya Vlasova, “A. Shyonberg v Rossii: Iz istorii vospriyatiya” (A. Schoenberg in Russia: Reception history), in Yekaterina Vlasova and Yelena Sorokina eds., *Naslediye: Russkaya muzika—mirovaya kul’tura* (Legacy: Russian music—world culture) (Moscow: Moskovskaya gosudarstvennaya konservatoriya imeni P. I. Chaykovskogo, 2009), 56–94.

⁶⁴ Nikolay Myaskovsky, “Chaykovskiy i Betkhoven,” *Muzika*, 77 (1912): 431–40.

EXAMPLE 1. Myaskovsky, Sonata No. 1 for Cello and Piano, op. 12, mov. 1, mm. 17–24

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 17 to 20, and the second system covers measures 21 to 24. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The piano part (right hand) features complex triplet patterns in the bass and treble clefs. The cello part (left hand) has rests in measures 17–20 and enters in measure 21. A 'sim.' (simile) marking is placed below the piano part in measure 20, indicating a continuation of the triplet pattern.

he experienced an acute tension between the contending claims of tradition and modernity. In his youth Myaskovsky came under the influence of Ivan Krīzhanovsky and Vyacheslav Karatīgin, both ardent propagandists for new music and founding members of an enterprising concert series, the Contemporary Music Evenings (*Vechera sovremennoy muziki*), which ran from 1901 until 1912 and introduced works by Debussy, Ravel, Schoenberg, Reger, and other notable modernists to the St. Petersburg public.⁶⁵ Krīzhanovsky taught Myaskovsky privately for several years. Some of his views to which his student was exposed at this formative stage of his development can be gleaned from a late pamphlet,

⁶⁵ For an account of the Contemporary Music Evenings, see I. V. Nest'yev, "Muzikal'niye kruzhki" (Musical circles), in Aleksandr Alekseyev ed., *Russkaya khudozhestvennaya kul'tura kontsa XIX-nachala XX veka (1908–1917)* (Russian artistic culture at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century [1908–1917]), vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 474–82. To judge from the collection of programs in the Myaskovsky archive in RGALI (f. 2040, op. 3, d. 96), Myaskovsky attended 34 of the 55 concerts given over the eleven years. A sketch of Krīzhanovsky's career is given in Yuliya Veysberg, "I. I. Krīzhanovskiy," *Sovremennaya muzika*, 13–14 (1926): 97–100. For Karatīgin, see Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva et al eds., *V. G. Karatīgin: zhizn', deyatel'nost', stat'i i materialy* (V. G. Karatīgin: life, activity, essays and documents) (Leningrad: Akademiya, 1927); and Y. Kremlev, "V. Karatīgin—muzikal'niy kritik," in Vyacheslav Karatīgin, *Izbranniye stat'i* (Moscow: Muzika, 1965), 3–20.

EXAMPLE 2. Myaskovsky, “V gostinoy,” op. 4, no. 3, opening

Ustalo [Weary]

p 3 3

Se-ra-ya ko-mna-ta.

Krayne virazitel'no i gibko [Extremely expressive and flexible]

Lento, ma con espressione

mf

poco acceler.

3 3 3 3

Re-chi ne spe-schni-ya, da-zhe ne stra-shni-ya,

ten.

a tempo

3

5 *mf*

da-zhe ne gre-schni-ya.

pp

3 3

The Biological Bases of the Evolution of Music, which drew on a mishmash of concepts derived from acoustics, heredity, Darwinian theory, and Hegelian philosophy in an attempt to demonstrate that the art of music was “subject to the same biological laws as the whole of organic, living nature,” and that the nature of musical compositions “evolved” over time, manifesting an ever-increasing complexity of harmonic language and formal organization.⁶⁶ According to Krīzhanovsky this process, aided by “creators of genius,” led inexorably to the “extinction” of older forms

⁶⁶ Ivan Kryzhanovsky, *The Biological Bases of the Evolution of Music*, trans. S. W. Pring (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 36.

and styles.⁶⁷ Karatigin, who was regarded as one of Russia's leading music critics, exerted an equally significant influence on Myaskovsky's artistic outlook—as is immediately evident if one compares the views expressed in their respective musical journalism.⁶⁸ A highly charismatic and erudite man, Karatigin was scathing in his denunciation of the staid provincialism of native musical life and eagerly promoted whatever struck him as innovative and progressive.

It is not difficult to imagine how the milieu of St. Petersburg's "advanced" musical circle might have engendered considerable stylistic self-consciousness in a young composer, especially if its members had, to quote Prokofiev's piquant description, "sharp tastes, but even sharper tongues."⁶⁹ As Myaskovsky acknowledged in a revealing comment in one of his reviews, "We desperately want to be progressive [and] naturally fall eagerly on everything that seems to be the 'last word.'"⁷⁰ And yet he could not bring himself to endorse Karatigin's dismissive attitude toward Chaikovsky, a composer whom he revered and whose symphonism furnished a point of creative departure for his own, or toward living Russian composers such as Rachmaninoff, who continued to write in a late-Romantic idiom.⁷¹ His laconic remarks about the group in his autobiographical essay certainly suggest an attitude of ambivalence:

I remained an outsider to this circle because even at that time the urge "to have the last word" in musical technique and invention did not have a self-sufficient value for me. In any case, the atmosphere of extremely intense striving for musical novelty and the most stringent evaluations of its fruits could not but infect me somehow and make me feel that I was still a dilettante.⁷²

⁶⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁸ On this connection see Ikonnikov, *Khudozhnik nashikh dnei*, 18–19.

⁶⁹ Sergey Prokofiev, *S. Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences*, ed. S. Shlifstein, trans. Rose Prokofieva (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n. d.), 25.

⁷⁰ "Roger-Ducasse. Quatour (en sol) pour piano, violin, alto et violoncello," in Shlifshteyn ed., *N. Ya. Myaskovskiy*, vol. 2, 154–55.

⁷¹ The music of Rachmaninoff, like that of Chaikovsky, was also censured by Karatigin's circle for its frank emotionality; see Ikonnikov, *Khudozhnik nashikh dnei*, 19. Myaskovsky held Rachmaninoff in very high esteem, as he did other contemporary figures such as Taneyev and Medtner.

⁷² Myaskovskiy, "Avtobiograficheskiye zametki," 11. If Myaskovsky harbored reservations about Karatigin's views, he was not alone: the American musicologist Alfred Swan, who came into close contact with Karatigin during his period of study at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire between 1911 and 1913, later opined that his overriding preoccupation with technical and stylistic innovation induced a critical myopia that caused him to judge the worth of new works solely by their extrinsic characteristics rather than their intrinsic quality; see Alfred J. Swan, *Russian Music and Its Sources in Chant and Folk-Song* (London: J. Baker, 1973), 182–83.

These remarks should not be interpreted merely as a retrospective disclaimer, which he felt obliged to make in 1936: the music he wrote before 1914 amply bears out their truthfulness. Apart from his recourse in some works to a more dissonant harmonic language, in almost every other respect his compositional idiom retained strong continuities with nineteenth-century traditions in its management of rhythm, phrase structure, texture, instrumental sonority, and formal organization.

When Myaskovsky resumed composing in 1917 after a three-year hiatus occasioned by compulsory military service, the pull of tradition proved stronger than any interest in modernist experimentation. The Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, which were completed within a short time of one another in 1918, once more display a notable indebtedness to the work of Chaikovsky and Glazunov. If the harmonic language of the Fourth is sometimes highly chromatic and dissonant—the spectral fugato that opens the slow movement adumbrates similar passages in the Thirteenth—that of the Fifth is radiantly diatonic with pronounced modal inflexions, anticipating the sound-world of much of the music that Myaskovsky composed after 1932. He continued to explore both of these stylistic directions throughout the 1920s. Whereas the feverish chromaticism of many passages in the Sixth and Seventh Symphonies (completed in 1923 and 1922, respectively) recalls to some extent Austro-German Expressionist styles of the previous decade, the more straightforwardly tonal idiom of the Eighth Symphony (1925) is closer in style to the Fifth.

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The only major works from this period that could be legitimately described as “modernist” are the Fourth Piano Sonata (1924–1925) and Tenth Symphony (1926–1927), in which Myaskovsky’s harmonic language reached an extreme of astringency. (The opening of the first movement of the sonata is shown in ex. 3.) It is almost certainly not a coincidence that these were written following Myaskovsky’s resumption of epistolary contact with Prokofiev in 1923.⁷³ Prokofiev had never been particularly enthusiastic about Myaskovsky’s music, and as he became acquainted with his more recent compositions, he found them stylistically *passé* and provincial (a favorite epithet of disparagement in his critical lexicon). When Myaskovsky confided to him in late 1923 that he was experiencing a creative crisis and felt chronically uncertain about the future direction of his work, Prokofiev evidently felt the time had come to speak his mind frankly.⁷⁴ In a lengthy letter of 3 January 1924 he described his responses to the Fifth Symphony, which he had recently

⁷³ The two men’s association dated back to 1906 when they met as fellow students in Lyadov’s class at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire. They had lost touch after Prokofiev emigrated in 1918.

⁷⁴ Myaskovsky to Prokofiev, 23 December 1923, in Prokofiev, *Perepishka*, 179–80.

EXAMPLE 3. Myaskovsky, Piano Sonata No. 4, op. 27, mov. 1, opening

Allegro moderato, irato

sf

Sch

Largamente

ff

Sua

acceler.

380

played through for Serge Koussevitzky. He declared himself to be “horrificed” by much of the score and especially by the “deadly influence of Glazunov” that he claimed was in evidence throughout.⁷⁵ Prokofiev left Myaskovsky in no doubt that he considered him to be hopelessly out of touch with contemporary musical developments and in danger of committing professional suicide if he continued to write works such as the Fifth Symphony, which would only find favor in a provincial backwater such as Moscow. He outlined the stark choice with which he considered the older man to be faced: he either had to evolve a compositional idiom that sounded respectably up-to-date or forfeit all hope of making a reputation outside the USSR.

Although Myaskovsky did not take umbrage at these brutally frank comments, their effect on him can well be imagined, especially as they

⁷⁵ Ibid., 181–82.

came from someone whose abilities he greatly admired and who spoke with an authority deriving from first-hand experience of musical life in major international artistic centers. The immediate effect of Prokofiev's criticism was to intensify Myaskovsky's stylistic self-consciousness and exacerbate his chronic self-doubt. His remarks about his own compositions in subsequent letters to Prokofiev throughout the 1920s reveal a painful sensitivity about how they might be regarded by his correspondent: their generally self-disparaging tenor suggests a defensive strategy adopted to deflect similar criticisms. Myaskovsky's comments about the Tenth Symphony in a letter of 10 August 1927 are a case in point: "I do not think you will like it: it has no purely musical beauties of any kind—it is mostly all *Sturm und Drang*. . . It could be effective in places, but I have so little liking for music at present that I don't feel like orchestrating it."⁷⁶

Yet, if Myaskovsky attempted in the Fourth Piano Sonata or Tenth Symphony to write in a more "progressive" style to attain validation in the West, he also seemed to be increasingly doubtful about the worth of such validation. From his correspondence with Prokofiev it emerges that he regarded much Western new music to be of nugatory artistic value. His conviction of the decadence of Western musical culture is palpable in a letter of 16 August 1925:

I have formed a pretty dire picture of modern composition in Europe. The triviality and banality of the French and Italians (Ravel, Casella, Malipiero, Milhaud, Auric, Al[eksandr] Cherepnin, and so on; even Honegger seems more of a *petit maître*—look at [*King*] *David*); the unbelievable aridity and coarseness of the Germans (Hindemith, [Heinrich] Kaminski, even Křenek, although he sometimes shows some personality) or the amorphously protoplasmic bloodlessness and beating-about-the-bush of Schoenberg and his litter⁷⁷—you simply do not know where to turn. And then there's Stravinsky, with his rubbish (has he lapsed into his second childhood?)!⁷⁸

Similar comments are contained in other letters.⁷⁹ The vehemence of Myaskovsky's remarks about leading modernist figures is surprising, especially when one considers his position as a founding member of the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 263.

⁷⁷ "Lukavomudrstvuyushchiy Schyonberg," an untranslatable pun on the Russian idiom "ne mudrstvuya lukavo," roughly equivalent to the English phrase "without beating about the bush."

⁷⁸ Prokofiev, *Perepiska*, 219.

⁷⁹ In his preface to the Soviet edition of the Prokofiev-Myaskovsky correspondence Kabalevsky adduced such comments as evidence of Myaskovsky's astute recognition of the purported crisis of contemporary Western bourgeois culture. See Patrick Zuk, "Musical Modernism in the Mirror of the Myaskovsky-Prokofiev Correspondence," in Christoph Flamm et al., eds., *Russian Émigré Culture: Conservatism or Evolution?* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013), 229–44.

Association for Contemporary Music (Assotsiatsiya sovremennoy muziki). Although it is important to contextualise these remarks (it is not difficult, after all, to think of other composers of the period who expressed themselves in a comparably intemperate manner about the music of their foreign contemporaries), the fact remains that they are uncomfortably reminiscent of the xenophobic rhetoric of the notorious 1948 Central Committee resolution on music, which, ironically, censured Myaskovsky and other leading Soviet composers for succumbing to decadent Western influences.⁸⁰ These passages cannot be explained away as a ruse adopted to avert unwanted attention from the security organs, which routinely intercepted foreign correspondence: they are completely consistent in tone and content with Myaskovsky's youthful journalism.⁸¹ If in 1912 he had envisioned Russian composers as the future custodians of the symphonic tradition that had degenerated in the West, by the late 1920s he may well have come to believe that the fateful responsibility for ensuring the preservation of a high musical culture lay with the Soviet Union.⁸²

It is thus not surprising that the Fourth Piano Sonata and the Tenth Symphony remained isolated experiments. In Myaskovsky's next compositions—the three light orchestral works collectively titled *Razvlecheniya* (Divertissements), op. 32, nos. 1–3 (1926–1929), the First and Second String Quartets, op. 33, nos. 1–2 (1930), the Eleventh Symphony, op. 34 (1931–1932)—he avoided dense chromaticism and resumed his exploration of a more diatonic idiom, inaugurating a significant new, although transitional, phase of his creative development. Significantly, the stylistic dualism that had been in evidence since the start of Myaskovsky's career was at last transcended: from this point onward he retained only as much of the dissonant chromaticism as suited his expressive needs, and integrated it into a consistent style. The harmonic language of these new works was firmly tonal, though by no means lacking in asperities. Far from marking a new departure, as Livanova and Schwarz claimed, the style of the Twelfth Symphony is completely consistent with that of works immediately preceding it, which in turn pursue a line of development proceeding from the Fifth and Eighth Symphonies. Stylized evocations of folk music abound in these scores; and

⁸⁰ See Dmitriy Kabalevskiy, "Chudesnaya družba" (A wonderful friendship), in Prokofiev, *Perepiska*, 16.

⁸¹ On the routine perustration of correspondence by the Soviet security organs at this period see Vladlen Izmozik, "Perepiska cherez GPU" (Correspondence through the GPU), *Rodina* 9 (1994): 78–83.

⁸² For a discussion of Myaskovsky's ambivalent attitudes to the West, see Olesya Bobrik, *Venskoye izdatel'stvo «Universal Edition» i muzikanti iz sovetsoy Rossii* (The Viennese publisher Universal Edition and musicians from Soviet Russia) (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo imeni N. I. Novikova, 2011), 191–208.

EXAMPLE 4. Myaskovsky, Symphony No. 5, op. 18, mov. 3, rehearsal number 57

[Allegro burlando]

57 [vlni]

129 *mf*

[fiati]

133 *f*

138

Myaskovsky typically presents such diatonic (and frequently modal) melodic material in piquant harmonizations featuring chromatically altered chords, false relations, and much semitonal voice-leading, frequently over a bass line that rises or falls by half-step. (Exx. 4–6 illustrate typical instances from the Fifth Symphony, the First String Quartet, and the Twelfth Symphony.) The similarities between the Twelfth Symphony and Myaskovsky's other work from the late 1920s even extend to strong resemblances between thematic ideas. The opening theme of the first movement, for instance, is very similar to that of the slow movement of the *Concertino lirico*, op. 32, no. 3, the third of *Razvlecheniya*. Both are in G minor; both contain a prominent leap of a minor seventh and outline intervallic contours of fourths; both feature a flattened seventh scale degree; and both ideas are stated on a wind instrument and accompanied by a similar undulating string figuration (exx. 7 and 8).

It is important to emphasize that this stylistic shift commenced over two years before RAPM's rise to dominance in 1929 (Myaskovsky began to sketch ideas and structural plans for *Razvlecheniya* in September 1926)

EXAMPLE 5. Myaskovsky, String Quartet, op. 33, no. 1, mov. 3, rehearsal number 15

113 [Allegro tenebroso]

117 poco più mosso

and four years before the composition of the Twelfth Symphony.⁸³ Although by 1926 his work had begun to incur criticism from proletarian musical factions, he had little to fear, for no less an august personage than Anatoliy Lunacharsky, the minister responsible for the arts, sciences and education, came to his public defense.⁸⁴ It would consequently seem unwarranted to assume that his subsequent abandonment of extreme chromaticism can be attributed entirely to coercion from RAPM—or, for that matter, to the effects of any “regimentation” imposed by the Composers’ Union. Indeed, Myaskovsky’s creative development seems to have proceeded in a manner that was remarkably independent of external pressures from these quarters: as we have seen, the difficulties that he experienced did not prevent him from writing two string quartets in 1930 or from subsequently composing the Thirteenth Symphony, even if the latter was the last work in which his harmonic language was so consistently dissonant. Arguably, the criticisms leveled at Myaskovsky’s compositional idiom by Prokofiev were more disruptive of his artistic equilibrium.

⁸³ See Myaskovsky’s diary entry for 9 September 1926, in Lamm, *Stranitsi*, 180.

⁸⁴ See the open letter “Pis’mo komsomol’tsev konservatoriyi tov. A. V. Lunacharskomu” (Letter from the Conservatoire Komsomol members to Comrade A. V. Lunacharsky), *Muzika i oktyabr’*, 4–5 (1926): 17. In his reply Lunacharsky rebuked the authors of the letter for criticising leading Soviet composers, and exhorted them to regard figures such as Myaskovsky and Prokofiev as worthy of admiration and emulation; see “Otvét tov. A. V. Lunacharskogo” (Comrade A. V. Lunacharsky’s reply), *ibid.*, 17–18.

EXAMPLE 6. Myaskovsky, Symphony No. 12, op. 35, mov. 1, 4 mm. after rehearsal number 15

[Allegro giocoso]

138 *f*

142 *f*

146 *piu. f*

385

EXAMPLE 7. Myaskovsky, *Concertino lirico*, op. 32, no. 3, mov. 2, rehearsal number 1

In tempo giusto ($\text{♩} = \text{c. } 54$)

8 *p* [cl] [cor]

pp [archi con sord]

12 *p* [cl]

EXAMPLE 8. Myaskovsky, Symphony No. 12, op. 35, mov. 1, rehearsal number 1

[Andante]
[vlni con sord]

10 *pp*

p e dolce
[c ing]

14

18

386

The underlying causes of significant stylistic change in the work of any artist are often intangible, and in the absence of any documentation their nature in Myaskovsky's case must remain a matter of speculation. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that this development may have had less to do with environmental factors than has been assumed. Myaskovsky was a traditionalist by temperament and by the late 1920s seems to have found himself thoroughly out of sympathy with most manifestations of musical modernism, having tired of the restless experimentation and *jusqu'au boutisme* characteristic of that decade. In this he was far from being alone: Prokofiev's quest for what he came to term a "new simplicity" of utterance commenced around this time;⁸⁵ and major modernist figures such as Hindemith and Bartók would also retreat from the stylistic extremes characteristic of much of their work in the 1920s and reaffirm their attachment to both tonality and tradition.

⁸⁵ David Nice suggests that this trend first began to manifest itself in Prokofiev's music as early as 1925–1926; see his *Prokofiev: From Russia to the West 1891–1935* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 223–24, 229.

It is possible that Myaskovsky felt he had exhausted what he had to say in a very dissonant idiom and that the change of style resulted from a desire for creative self-renewal and a quest for new expressive means. Nor can we read too much into the fact that Myaskovsky did not subsequently write another work similar to the Tenth or Thirteenth Symphonies; neither Sibelius nor Vaughan Williams subsequently composed anything akin to their respective Fourth and Sixth Symphonies, both of which are exceptionally sombre scores in their composers' outputs. Whatever the explanation, the relationship between the style of Myaskovsky's later music and one strand of his earlier work is clearly audible.

Schwarz's uncritical acceptance of the construction that Livanova placed on Myaskovsky's career led him to assume that the style of his later music resulted from the composer's attempt to conform to the dictates of Socialist Realism in the wake of his supposedly enforced abjuration of modernism. The characterization of the music that Myaskovsky composed after 1932–1933 as Socialist Realist, however, is as dubious as is the description of his earlier work as modernist. Livanova did her utmost to portray the composer as having reformed in the early 1930s and to claim as much of his subsequent output as she could for the Socialist Realist musical canon, but even by dint of wholesale suppression and distortion of crucial evidence it was impossible to impose this construct on Myaskovsky's life and work without strain. A fundamental difficulty was presented by the fact that after 1932 he continued to compose much as he had previously, the change of style notwithstanding. Abstract instrumental works—symphonies, string quartets, and instrumental sonatas—remained preponderant in his later output. He showed as little inclination as ever to cultivate “democratic” genres: there are scarcely any compositions on overtly ideological themes, and his sole attempt to write a work explicitly in praise of Stalin, the short cantata *Kreml' noch'yu* (The Kremlin at Night), which, incidentally, was completed in 1947 during the exceptionally tense period of the *Zhdanovshchina*, was roundly condemned because it was so unconventional. In this respect Myaskovsky affords a striking contrast to Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and indeed virtually every other major figure in Soviet music at the period, all of whom showed considerably greater readiness to fulfill official expectations. Moreover, the generally introspective character of Myaskovsky's work mostly eschews blatant expressions of “optimism” and kindred qualities prized by Soviet critics. Unsurprisingly, suspicions about the genuineness of Myaskovsky's engagement with Socialist Realism proved persistent during his lifetime. A secret report compiled by Andrey Zhdanov's assistant Dmitriy Shepilov before the promulgation of the 1948 resolution seems to sum up a widely held view of Myaskovsky as a composer whose work was “difficult” and devoid of appeal. Shepilov expressly criticized

him for expending too much effort on what he described as “pure” symphonic music, which was supposedly incomprehensible to the masses. Myaskovsky’s subsequent condemnation in 1948 was largely occasioned by his failure to produce work on more orthodox Socialist Realist lines. Yet even then he did not attempt to make a show of ideological conformity, but went on to produce two further symphonies and another string quartet before his death in 1950.⁸⁶ It is consequently quite understandable that Livanova experienced considerable difficulty in making a tenable case for Myaskovsky’s supposed stylistic “reform.” She attempted to solve the problem by focusing on compositions in which she could plausibly claim to discern desirable Socialist Realist characteristics and glossing over the remainder; when this proved impossible, she explained such works away as regrettable instances of recidivism.⁸⁷

As theorists never tired of emphasizing, the Socialist Realist conception of the arts meant that for composers the communication of appropriate ideological content had to take precedence over purely artistic considerations.⁸⁸ Very little of Myaskovsky’s later work satisfies this fundamental criterion. Whereas it is undoubtedly true that Soviet composers were discouraged from exploring certain kinds of modernist idioms, a compositional style did not automatically qualify as Socialist Realist merely because it was conservative—as Myaskovsky’s condemnation in 1948 demonstrates. Consequently the application of the term “Socialist Realist” to Myaskovsky’s later output in its entirety—and perhaps to much other music by other Soviet composers of this period—may be both inappropriate and misleading. If viewed in a wider international context, Myaskovsky’s late work is by no means exceptional in its manifest continuities with *fin-de-siècle* styles, its employment of a tonal harmonic language, its persistent cultivation of traditional genres such as the symphony, its references to folk music, and its general avoidance of the strained rhetoric of Expressionist and post-Expressionist idioms. The work of many prominent British contemporaries of Myaskovsky’s generation, such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Arnold Bax, Arthur Bliss, and E. J. Moeran, exhibits similar traits. Shostakovich is known to have described Myaskovsky as “the Russian Vaughan Williams” on account of the kinship between the two composers’ styles.⁸⁹ While this comparison is undoubtedly

⁸⁶ For a discussion of Myaskovsky’s embroilment in the anti-formalist campaign and of Shepilov’s report, see Zuk, “Nikolay Myaskovsky and the Events of 1948.”

⁸⁷ See, for example, her discussion of *Kreml’ noch’yu* in Livanova, *N. Ya. Myaskovsky*, 205.

⁸⁸ One of the classic formulations of this view can be found in the opening chapter of Aleksandr Shaverdyan ed., *Puti razvitiya sovetskoy muziki: Kratkiy Obzor* (Paths of the development of Soviet music: A Short Survey) (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye muzikal’noye izdatel’stvo, 1948).

⁸⁹ Shostakovich’s observation was relayed to Benjamin Britten by Mstislav Rostropovich (personal communication with Mr. Murray McLachlan, 14 August 2011).

EXAMPLE 9. Arnold Bax, Second Piano Sonata, mm. 92-107

Poco più largamente

92 *ff*

95 *Very broad*
sempre ff

99 *sf* *accel.*

103 L.H. *Hold back*

apt, Myaskovsky's later work arguably evinces equally strong similarities to the music of Bax, especially in its characteristic practice of superimposing modal and diatonic melodies on chromatic harmonic backgrounds: in this respect, the excerpt from Bax's Second Piano Sonata (1919–1920), quoted in example 9, is strikingly similar to examples 4–6 above. Needless to say, British composers were under no compulsion to write in this manner: they

chose to do so. It was only after the emergence of composers such as Elisabeth Lutyens and Humphrey Searle in the late 1940s and early 1950s that the employment of atonal or serial idioms became more widespread. Similarly, these styles were by no means universally adopted in the United States or in Europe during Myaskovsky's lifetime.⁹⁰

In sum, an examination of Myaskovsky's artistic development raises the question of the extent to which Schwarz's contentions concerning the "regimented" nature of Soviet musical creativity after 1932 may need to be revised. In the cases of some composers, at least, this perspective may misrepresent circumstances that were far more complex than Schwarz and later authors seemed to have realized. Aside from his uncritical reliance on dubious Soviet sources and what appears to have been a rather superficial knowledge of Myaskovsky's music, Schwarz's view of the composer seems to have been colored by preconceptions of a kind that have been all too prevalent in writing on this repertory. Such preconceptions led him to assume that the Composers' Union presided over what was largely an artistic wasteland, much as Goebbels's *Reichsmusikkammer* had done. Since the work of almost every significant Soviet composer apart from Shostakovich and Prokofiev still awaits reappraisal, one wonders to what extent our inherited notions of musical "Sovietness" will ultimately seem as dubious as the notions of an essentialised "Russianness" that influenced evaluations of nineteenth-century figures such as Glinka and Chaikovsky until the comparatively recent re-evaluations by Taruskin and Frolova-Walker.

In arguing that Myaskovsky's stylistic turn in the late 1920s and early 1930s cannot be attributed solely to external pressures, I do not underestimate the challenges presented by the environment in which Soviet composers worked. I merely wish to suggest that we should try to place these pressures in greater perspective and view them as only one factor influencing their artistic development among others that may be of equal or possibly greater significance. It is by no means self-evident that the quality of their work inevitably suffered as a result of political pressure or that externally imposed constraints exerted the most decisive influence on the formation of their musical styles. It is possible that Myaskovsky may have felt the pressures from Prokofiev to bring his style into greater conformity with contemporary modernist idioms far more acutely than the ideological pressure exerted by RAPM or colleagues in the Composers' Union. Paradoxical though it might sound, subsequent

⁹⁰ Leading American composers such as Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, and Samuel Barber continued to work in tonal idioms throughout the 1930s and 1940s. A similar tendency can be observed among prominent Scandinavian figures, such as Vagn Holmboe, Dag Wirén, Lars-Erik Larsson, and Harald Saeverud. These examples could easily be multiplied.

to the promulgation of the 1932 Resolution he may even have come to regard the USSR as an environment that was more conducive to musical creativity than the West, as it was not subject to what he regarded as the fickle changes in taste and constant craving for novelty of Western audiences, or the tyranny of what Nikolay Medtner described as the “fashion for fashion” (*moda na modu*).⁹¹ (It would appear that Prokofiev ultimately inclined to a similar view: his dissatisfaction with the state of Western musical life had a significant bearing on his decision to return to the USSR.) Moreover, an attitude of covert resistance to official artistic policy was by no means exclusively confined to composers of modernist or avant-garde leanings: a composer such as Myaskovsky, working in a style that was clearly rooted in tradition, could seek to preserve a measure of autonomy and freedom of creative choice even when placed under pressure to engage with overtly “ideological” subjects, as in the case of the so-called “Collective Farm” Symphony. Although his resistance never assumed the form of open dissidence, it is difficult not to concur with Iosif Rayskin’s contention that “as with Pasternak in literature, Myaskovsky in music represented the phenomenon of inner emigration, a form of spiritual resistance to a suppressive regime.” As Rayskin points out, Myaskovsky paid a heavy price for his unwillingness to make artistic compromises: not only was he condemned in 1948, but many of his finest compositions were excluded from Soviet concert programs.⁹²

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Even if Myaskovsky and many of his contemporaries ultimately preferred to adopt more traditional modes of expression, we cannot necessarily assume that they did so out of a sense of compulsion. Their choice may have been prompted by concerns that were also shared by many of their Western contemporaries: reluctance to break with the past, disenchantment with musical modernism, and a desire not to alienate the wider musical public. The idioms in which they wrote from the 1930s have many features in common with compositional styles then prevalent in other countries and were by no means peculiar to the Soviet Union.

There is a need for studies of their work that consider it afresh on its own terms, free from Soviet obfuscation and Western perspectives shaped by the Cold War. As far as the latter are concerned, it is salutary to recall the concerns voiced by the art historian Matthew Cullern Bowen about the lingering prevalence of such views and the ways in which they continue to hinder sympathetic and objective engagement with Soviet artworks on their own terms as works of art:

⁹¹ Nikolay Metner, *Muza i moda: zashchita osnov muzikal'nogo iskusstva* (The muse and fashion: a defence of the bases of the art of music) (Paris: YMCA Press, 1935), 108.

⁹² Iosif Genrikhovich Rayskin, “Myaskovsky, Nikolay Yakovlevich,” *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, at <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/19490> (accessed 21 January 2013).

A...feature of current discourse is the critical reluctance to consider socialist realism as art *per se*, with all that this would entail, including a recognition of the “creativity” and “individuality” of the artist; what is favoured, basically, is the explication of art-works in terms of political events, pressures and directives. This reluctance is attributable in part, perhaps, to a critical consensus according to which modernism may have died, but “important” contemporary art is required to display characteristics closely associated with modernism, such as an “original” vision (often to be identified in terms of idiosyncrasy of technique) and the capacity to *épater les bourgeois*. Socialist realism would appear to fail to meet these criteria; and, as art created for the common herd, it has limited snob appeal. But this reluctance may also reflect critics’ lack of detailed and first-hand knowledge of the art in question... Moreover, socialist realist works can cause serious misgivings among some critics because of their association with reprehensible regimes... [Such] moral shrinking... is widespread and instinctive; it inevitably puts critics on their guard against the artistic quality of individual works and tends, broadly speaking, to repudiate any true creative process.⁹³

Bown’s observations are equally pertinent to the study of Soviet music, especially when it comes to keeping the effects of “political events, pressures and directives” in proper perspective.

Contemporary scholarship on other Soviet artistic domains suggests that Myaskovsky was not alone in behaving as he did. Sergey Ivanov’s recent book on the Leningrad school of visual artists, for instance, demonstrates the remarkable vitality and variety of some of the works produced during the Stalinist period, which, in the author’s words, “refutes convictions that artistic creativity was completely subordinated to political demands and crushed by ideology. In many of the paintings... painters set themselves and successfully realised purely artistic tasks.”⁹⁴ Such words seem equally applicable to Myaskovsky, who was preoccupied with the intellectual and technical challenges posed by the symphony and pursued this preoccupation without deviation, possibly disregarding political or ideological considerations to a much greater extent than commentators have been prepared to allow.

It would also be timely to situate Soviet composition in a wider international context, with the aim to demonstrate that many of its typical stylistic traits were not unique to Soviet music but bear a close resemblance to compositions written elsewhere. As the case of Myaskovsky demonstrates, the study of the reception history of Soviet music in the

⁹³ Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998), xvii.

⁹⁴ Sergey Ivanov, *Neizvestnyĭ sotsrealizm: Leningradskaya shkola* (Unknown Socialist Realism: The Leningrad School) (St. Petersburg: “NP-Print,” 2007), 18.

West seems likely to continue to yield valuable insights into the ideological biases informing canon formation and influencing critical validation in historical narratives of twentieth-century music.

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ABSTRACT

Western studies of musical life in the USSR have typically placed great emphasis on the constraints to which composers were subject and often appear to have accepted as axiomatic the notion that the styles of Soviet composition of the Stalinist era were fundamentally conditioned by external pressures. One of the most influential formulations of this view is to be found in Boris Schwarz's *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, which has remained a standard work of reference for over four decades. Schwarz considered the promulgation of the Communist Party's resolution of 23 April 1932 "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organisations" to represent a fateful turning point in the fortunes of Soviet music, marking the inauguration of a stultifying new era of "regimentation" and the demise of freedoms that had remained after the persecution of leading modernists by the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians. According to Schwarz "advanced composers turned conventional, and conventional composers turned commonplace." In Schwarz's view, the newly founded Composers' Union, just as Goebbels's *Reichsmusikkammer*, presided over an artistic wasteland.

In this essay I question such generalizations. I focus on Nikolay Myaskovsky (1881–1950), regarded by Schwarz as a prime example of a modernist who retreated into safe conventionality in the early 1930s after the composition of his notorious Twelfth Symphony, ostensibly written to glorify Stalin's grandiose project of agricultural collectivization. A re-examination of the circumstances surrounding the symphony's genesis suggests that the constructions Schwarz placed on this phase of Myaskovsky's career are questionable. Although the composer's harmonic language became noticeably less dissonant after 1932 than in certain works of the 1920s, I argue that this cannot be attributed solely to external pressures, as Myaskovsky's later style evinces strong continuities with tendencies manifest in his earlier work. The essay closes by reflecting on the wider implications of these findings for our understanding of Soviet composition of the Stalinist era.

Keywords: Nikolay Myaskovsky, Socialist Realism, Soviet compositional styles, Soviet symphonism, Western reception history of Soviet music